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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003613

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN CRIES BETRAYAL AGAIN BUT WILL AVOID  
STREETS FOR NOW

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Michel Aoun recounted to the Ambassador November 13 that March 14 leaders had offered a tradeoff to Aoun and Hizballah during Nabih Berri's national consultations -- the Hariri assassination tribunal for an expansion of the cabinet -- but that the group had gone back on its offer and abruptly planned to implement the tribunal unilaterally. The move was emblematic of March 14's exclusion of others from power, in particular Christians. The March 14 offer to Aoun never approached Aoun's desired outcome: a sixth of the cabinet, electoral reform, new parliamentary elections, and subsequently a replacement of the President. Meanwhile, following the resignation of the Shia ministers, the cabinet is powerless, and any attempt to govern without them -- with or without Aoun -- would be dangerous. The rump cabinet's move to approve the tribunal on November 13 is provocative, but no street action will come before Berri's return from Iran, November 16 at the earliest. Aoun, meanwhile, says he will keep his supporters out of demonstrations for the time being and use his contact with Hizballah as a moderating influence. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador and Polchief called on a relaxed Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), at his residence in Rabieh November 13. Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil also attended. Aoun remarked that he had met the previous day with the new Norwegian Charge d'Affaires; following the visit of its foreign minister last week, the GON has just established an embassy in Beirut. Clearly relishing the spotlight, he recounted that he had also received UN envoy Geir Pedersen, Justice Minister Charles Rizk and Aoun advisor Mohammed Chattah on November 12.

CONSULTATIONS

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¶3. (C) Aoun was surprised at the failure of the consultations, he said. The group set out to discuss a possible expansion of the cabinet and a new electoral law. They discussed the first but reached no agreement, he explained. The crucial moment was the evening of November 9, he said, when Berri told Aoun that he had talked with Mustaqbal Party leader Saad Hariri and Hizballah representative Mohammed Raad and said that they had reached a

proposal for consideration at the November 11 session. Under the proposal, Hariri would support the expansion of the cabinet, including a blocking minority, as long as there is agreement to create the tribunal. Hizballah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah was consulted and gave his

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assent.

14. (C) Then on the morning of November 11, two surprises greeted conferees arriving for the final round of consultations, according to Aoun. The first was that Saad Hariri had withdrawn his agreement to the November 9 proposal. The second was that Siniora was not present; he was busy notifying the cabinet and President Lahoud of his intention to place the tribunal document on the agenda of the November 13 cabinet meeting. (There is a 48-hour advance notice requirement to add agenda items.) This changed the atmosphere of the November 11 session completely, Aoun said, for the worse.

15. (C) Bassil expressed his disappointment that the March 14 leaders had gone back on their offer of a "tradeoff" -- the tribunal for a cabinet expansion. When the Ambassador challenged the term "tradeoff," noting that all Lebanese parties had expressed at least verbal support for the tribunal, Aoun said that his principal concern is to obtain a blocking minority. The PM, he averred, had scuttled the proposal because he is determined to reduce Christian power in Lebanon. The Ambassador countered that should Aoun have four seats in the cabinet, the PM would not govern against FPM's wishes, just as he would not govern against Amal or Hizballah wishes. The principle of consensus would be respected for the FPM as well as for the other parties and confessional groups.

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#### AFTER THE RESIGNATIONS

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16. (C) The Ambassador noted that after their resignations, the Amal ministers' statements suggested that there may be a way out of the crisis, whereas the Hizballah ministers appeared resigned to a permanent impasse, possibly to confrontational demonstrations. Aoun said that the resignations were more important than any possible demonstrations. All confessions have to be represented in the cabinet, he said, and without the Shia the cabinet is powerless. The Ambassador noted that the signatures of both the PM and President are required to accept the resignation of a minister, and that Siniora had refused to recognize the resignations. Aoun rejected that notion, saying that what is important is the minister's will. Finally, when asked, Aoun doubted that Hizballah's MPs would resign from the Chamber of Deputies.

17. (C) When the Ambassador proposed that Aoun would be in a good position to sit out the dispute between March 8 and March 14 groups and emerge relatively stronger, he said that he would insist to be a part of any proposed change in government. One of his principal demands would be "anticipated" -- i.e., accelerated -- parliamentary elections. Aoun will also insist on the principle that a two-thirds parliamentary majority is required to install a new cabinet, as opposed to a simple majority. Finally, Aoun will continue to demand cabinet representation for each party in proportion to its share of seats in Parliament. When asked by the Ambassador, Aoun said that he had indeed been offered four seats in the cabinet -- but in a cabinet of 30 ministers, not 24. (From the beginning of the consultations, Aoun held out for one-sixth of the cabinet, the same proportion of seats he controls in Parliament.)

18. (C) Aoun told us, as had PM Siniora previously, that former Washington Ambassador and close Siniora advisor

Mohammed Chattah had visited him the day before in an attempt to solve the cabinet crisis. Aoun turned down Chattah's overture, however, as he had offered Aoun the same formula -- four seats out of 30 -- that Aoun had rejected in the consultation process. In addition, Aoun said, there could be no "national unity government" without the Shia ministers. When the Ambassador suggested that Aoun join the cabinet now as a way to pressure the Shia to come back, Aoun said that such a move would be dangerous and cut the last ties between Christians and Shia. Aoun added that he sees the future very pessimistically, and warned that there could be civil war.

#### CREATING A CRISIS

¶9. (C) The Ambassador explained to Aoun that the USG is principally concerned regarding the positions taken by Amal and Hizballah. The FPM position that its voice is not counted is not groundless. However Amal and Hizballah are represented in the GOL, and the only explanation for their action to create a crisis now is the tribunal. Aoun replied that he had also met on November 12 with Justice Minister Charles Rizk, whom he asked to inveigh upon PM Siniora to delay the cabinet meeting (discussing the tribunal) to November 16 (the regular weekly cabinet session), which Aoun considered less "provocative." If the meeting could not be delayed, Aoun asked Rizk to work to delay the decision. Aoun did not indicate why approving the tribunal on the 16th might be less provocative or more palatable than it would on the 13th.

¶10. (C) When the Ambassador suggested that the GOL may be concerned that Hizballah demonstrations could prevent the holding of a cabinet meeting on November 16, Aoun doubted that Hizballah would take to the streets to stop the tribunal. March 8 parties can stop the tribunal in the Chamber of Deputies, Aoun said, because as a transfer of sovereignty to the UN the tribunal requires parliamentary approval. There is, however, powerful objection to the tribunal, he added.

¶11. (C) The Ambassador noted that Aoun and the Shia parties have different reasons for insisting on a blocking minority in the cabinet. Aoun seeks the power to collapse the cabinet

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at any moment (through resignation of a third of its ministers), making himself the master of the cabinet and paving the way for early parliamentary elections and for his ascension to the presidency. On the other hand, Hizballah seeks a veto over measures before the cabinet, including the tribunal. Either way, the proposal to expand the cabinet is presented as confrontation, not partnership. Aoun complained that according to March 14 figures, if one is not with them one is against them. Bassil added that the FPM had collaborated with the March 14-led government on several occasions, citing Aoun's calling for an international tribunal early on, as well as FPM MPs voting against the extradition of Walid Jumblatt requested by Damascus.

#### THE STREETS

¶12. (C) Aoun noted that March 8 parties may go to the streets but that "we are in no hurry." He said that he would express his wish that the other groups not demonstrate.

¶13. (C) Berri, Aoun said, can do nothing about the crisis. Nevertheless, Hizballah will not do anything at the street level until Berri returns from Iran, which means Thursday at the earliest.

¶14. (C) When asked whether, in the context of the FPM Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah, Aoun could monitor Hizballah and perhaps exert some constructive influence, Aoun confirmed that FPM remains in contact with

Hizballah. Up to now, he said, Hizballah has said nothing about resorting to street action.

FELTMAN